

## UNREQUITED PATRIOTISM: REMEMBERING THE STORIES OF THE NANYANG VOLUNTEERS

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### Introduction

Huaqiao Jigong Huiguo Fuwutuan, also known as Huaqiao Jigong or Nanqiao Jigong (hereafter referred to as the Nanyang Volunteers), was the official name of a group of volunteer drivers and mechanics who set off from Singapore to Kunming, China in 1939 to take up the call to resist the full-scale invasion of mainland China by Japanese forces. The volunteers came from the region then known as Nanyang, which literally means the South Seas—a historic China-centric term referring to the lands south of China—and were mainly of Chinese descent. However, with the surrender of Japanese troops and the ensuing Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists, the Nanyang Volunteers were mostly forgotten and relegated to the social and collective memories on the peripheries of national history.<sup>1</sup>

On 4 March 2013, a concrete sculpture commemorating the war efforts of the Nanyang Volunteers was unveiled in the front garden of the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in Singapore. The Guest-of-Honor, Senior Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Mr. Sam C.S. Tan, commented that “this marks not the end of a project, but a new beginning.”<sup>2</sup> However, critics lamented that this latest inclusion into the war memorial scene in Singapore was “66 years later than Kuala Lumpur, 62 years later than Penang, and 28 years slower than Yunnan,” highlighting the long overdue process of commemorating the Nanyang Volunteers.<sup>3</sup> This raises the question of why there was a delay of almost half a century in erecting a memorial for this displaced group of war heroes.

John R. Gillis reminds us that “memories and identities are not fixed things but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective

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1 By referring to social and collective memories, I am emphasizing that the experiences of the Nanyang Volunteers have been left out of public commemorative events. For an in-depth discussion on social, collective, and public memories, see Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), pp. 17-44.

2 *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore) 5 March 2013.

3 *Ibid.*, 9 March 2013.

phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, memory endorses identity by “establishing permanence and continuity in the face of rampant change.”<sup>5</sup> War memory, on the other hand by nature of its definition, is invariably shaped by pre-existing cultural and social discourses, existing in tension with them.<sup>6</sup> Such tensions are exemplified in the case of Singapore as early as in the 1960s, when state efforts to impose a unifying theme over “the disparate, and potentially disruptive, war memories of individuals and communities” were well in progress.<sup>7</sup> Scholarly works on war memory in Singapore highlight the plurality of war experiences, emphasizing the point that there was not just one episode of foreign occupation or one geographical space that experienced war as residents of colonial Singapore were engaged in various war theaters during World War II (WWII). They point out that popular memory of the war has remained alive in the private sphere despite suppression or “domestication”<sup>8</sup> of public memory by political elites. Public war memory thus challenges the current exclusive national historical narrative, and past studies have argued for the usefulness of alternative war memories in studying the conflict, albeit their non-exclusive nature that undermines the legitimacy of the nation-state.

The stories of these volunteers are not just alternative historical narratives; they serve as the diasporic memories of a Chinese community who were dislodged from their geographical and chronological spaces. By analyzing the complexities behind the commemoration of these volunteers, this article underlines the ironies and tensions behind the process of using this piece of transnational memory in the national narrative of Singapore, challenging the notion that national is no longer the “inevitable or preeminent scale” for which history is written and remembered.<sup>9</sup>

In multiracial Singapore, war remembrance of the different ethnic communities takes an interesting twist into aligning with the national narrative of common suffering in WWII. The initial Chinese project of remembering the majority Chinese victims of the *Sook Ching* massacre was transformed into a national war commemoration, as seen

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4 John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3.

5 Jeffrey K. Olick, “Introduction,” in *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, eds. Jeffrey K. Olick et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 7.

6 T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, 2000. “The politics of war memory and commemoration: Contexts, structures and dynamics,” in *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, eds., T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 18-19.

7 Kevin Blackburn, and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), p. 9.

8 Blackburn and Hack describe “domestication” as re-narrating the individual war accounts to fit the national agenda of promoting loyalty to Singapore.

9 Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 2.

in the case of the Civilian War Memorial which features four pillars symbolizing the four major races in Singapore with an urn containing unidentified ashes of the victims.<sup>10</sup> Current literature falls into either the category of victimhood or the valiant stories of futile resistance. The former, often dominated by themes of immense hardships and sufferings during the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), is overshadowed by moral overtones in which local memories of the war is evoked—the image of the passive Chinese victim versus the Japanese racist aggressor. On the other hand, the British-aided Force 136 and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army reveal images of valiance and positive expressions of patriotism but unsuccessful resistance against a much stronger enemy.

Academic works on the contributions of the overseas Chinese to the Sino-Japanese war are limited to discussions of their immense financial support, neglecting their actual combat involvements. Besides, English scholarship on the Nanyang Volunteers is scarce, albeit the considerable number of Chinese biographical works on surviving Nanyang Volunteers published in recent years. In discussing a group as diverse as the overseas Chinese, what are the implications of their private (war) memory in WWII on how they negotiate their identities in the postwar political landscapes engendered by surging local nationalisms? Can alternative private memories fit within the framework of national memory?

Historian Ernest Koh offers an insightful framework by delineating three frames of war memories—Sino-Japanese, Imperial, and Pacific—in which the Singapore Chinese community shared.<sup>11</sup> Based on primary sources from diaries and other related publications on the Sino-Japanese war theater, this article argues that war memories of a transnational ethnic group such as the overseas Chinese remain relevant and expedient in constructing modern national history in this age of globalization.<sup>12</sup>

This article comprises three sections. The first section outlines the beginnings of the Nanyang Volunteers – an oscillating trajectory that is characterized by both positive expressions of patriotism and negative examples of ideological conflicts and administrative excesses. Next, I explore the plights of decommissioned drivers and mechanics from the fall of Burma in May 1942 to the end of war, and the political complexities behind the repatriation process of the volunteers. Finally, the last section unravels the politics of the commemoration of this hitherto neglected piece of local memory, discussing how the state and civil society have collaborated in reconfiguring public spaces for the commemoration of the volunteers and framing the local war memories of the volunteers as part of a “globalized memory” of WWII. This article

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10 Kevin Blackburn, “The Collective Memory of the Sook Ching Massacre and the Creation of the Civilian War Memorial of Singapore,” *JMBRAS* 73, 2 (2000), pp. 71-90.

11 Ernest Koh, *Diaspora at War: The Chinese of Singapore between Empire and Nation, 1937-1945*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 4.

12 Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, “Introduction,” in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds., Assmann and Conrad (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-16.

emphasizes that private memories of overseas Chinese, regardless of ideological affinities, are an integral part of the region's history. In recounting the WWII experiences of the Chinese community in Singapore, the history of the Nanyang Volunteers departs from the two common themes of victimhood and heroism, charting a new narrative of unrequited patriotism of heroes forgotten and tales untold.

### Singapore to Kunming: Nanyang Volunteers and the Burma Road

The six-hundred-miles long Burma Road connecting Kunming in Nationalist China to Lashio in British Burma was officially opened on 10 January 1939, after years of planning and construction undertaken jointly by both the Chinese and British governments.<sup>13</sup> On 21 October 1938, with the fall of Guangzhou, China was deprived of its last major port of entry, leaving over twenty thousand tons of war materials immovable in Hong Kong. In response to this dire situation, the Nationalist government established the Southwest Transport Agency, headed by Song Ziliang, with its managing office in Singapore, under the registered name of Southwest Transportation Company (STC).<sup>14</sup> Facing an acute shortage of skilled drivers, Song sent a telegram to Tan Kah Kee, chairman of the Federation of China Relief Funds of Southeast Asia, requesting his assistance in recruiting drivers and mechanics to work in China.<sup>15</sup> The Nationalist government was confident that the overseas Chinese would respond favorably to their call as a result of various outreach programs and policies that were implemented between the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>16</sup> The reality of a struggling, weak China oppressed by its Japanese aggressor appealed to the renewed sense of national identity among the overseas Chinese communities, as reflected in slogans such as "Once a Chinese, always a Chinese." Coupled with the traumatic defeats and atrocities suffered by their Chinese compatriots under the Japanese, "the floodgates of nationalist emotion" were successfully opened.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Henry Crow, "The Burma Road," *The Geographical Journal* 99, 5/6 (1942), pp. 238-239.

14 Walter H. Mallory, "The Burma Road," *Foreign Affairs* 17, 3 (1939), pp. 625-627; Xu Yunqiao and Cai Shijun, *Xin Ma Huaren kang Ri shiliao, 1937-1945* (Singapore: Wenshi chuban siren youxian gongsi, 1984), p. 61.

15 Formed on 10 October 1938, the Federation was the central organization uniting all existing local war relief support organizations (totaling 702) set up by overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. It was the very first and probably the last time when overseas Chinese showed such a strong sense of unity and solidarity. See Tan Kah Kee, *Nanqiao Huiyilu* (Singapore, 1946); Yōji Akashi, *The Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement, 1937-1941* (Lawrence, KS: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1970).

16 C. F. Yong and R. B. McKenna, *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 10.

17 Paul J. Bolt, *China and Southeast Asia's Ethnic Chinese: State and Diaspora in Contemporary Asia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), p. 43; Wang Gungwu, *Community and Nation: China, Southeast Asia, and Australia* (Kensington: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin, 1992), p. 52.

The Federation urged local Chinese organizations to set up drivers' training centers to better prepare the candidates for adverse conditions at the warfront. The recruitment drive was akin to an army enlistment as the volunteers had to undergo a six-month military training upon arrival in Kunming before their final deployment in military establishments along the Burma Road.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the first batch of eighty overseas Chinese set sail onboard a French liner to Kunming via Indochina on 18 February 1939.<sup>19</sup>

A rough estimation of 5,000 people came to volunteer and about 3,200 were selected.<sup>20</sup> Despite the stringent checks and regulations, there were instances where candidates falsely reported their age, while some such as Li Yuemei and Bai Xuejiao successfully disguised as males and passed the selection. In a touching letter describing her emotional struggles, Bai wrote to her parents:

I am very sad to depart without a word. I love my family, my siblings, but even more my ailing country. This is the time for the youths to act, to witness for ourselves this decisive battle and the birth of a New China, to contribute to the country as well as repay you for all that you have done.<sup>21</sup>

Born into a well-to-do family in Penang, Bai's actions caused a stir in the local Chinese community when her letter was published in the local newspapers. Similarly, Li kept her actions a secret from her family and concealed her identity by wearing her brother's clothing during the recruitment drive. She then became a driver in the Red Cross base in Guizhou before her identity was revealed after a traffic accident, and she was later dispatched as a nurse.<sup>22</sup> Both ladies, among others, were celebrated by the newspapers as modern-day *Hua Mulans*.<sup>23</sup> Intriguingly, not all the Nanyang Volunteers were of Chinese origins.<sup>24</sup> One of them was Dara Singh from Taiping who took the name Wang Ya'neng after his Chinese friend of that very same name pulled out at the last minute

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18 Chen Gongcun, *Nanqiao hun* (Kunming: Yunnan meishu chubanshe, 2006), p. 38; Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and All-China Federation of Returned Overseas, eds., *Huiyi Chen Jiageng: ji 'nian Chen Jiageng xiansheng danchen yibaoyishi zhounian* (Beijing: Wenshi ziliao chubanshe, 1984), p. 114.

19 Stephen Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, 2 (1979), pp. 293–320.

20 Official accounts record 3,192 volunteers, but some sources claim that more than six hundred volunteers bypassed Singapore and traveled directly to China.

21 *Guanghua Ribao* (Penang) 19 May 1939.

22 Zhong Xijin, *Nanqiao jigong you chang bu wan de beige* (Alor Setar: Chitu wengong bianjibu 2000), pp. 93–95.

23 For more on the representation of Hua Mulan in contemporary times, see Lan Dong, *Mulan's legend and legacy in China and the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011).

24 Tan, *Nanqiao huiyilu*, p. 85.

due to opposition from his family.<sup>25</sup> He later excelled in the military and attained the rank of Major General.<sup>26</sup> The departure of every volunteer batch from Singapore was always accompanied by an elaborate farewell ceremony, with the streets leading to the pier thronged with supporters.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the volunteers were received warmly in Kunming.<sup>28</sup> The return of the Nanyang Volunteers showed the Chinese back in China that the overseas Chinese were not taking a backseat by giving mere monetary support but willing to enter the frontlines and lay their lives down for their motherland.

Conditions along the Burma Road were harsh as exemplified by a common saying among the Nanyang Volunteers, “For every single overseas Chinese who died, nine out of ten from the enemy camp would not survive.”<sup>29</sup> This testified to the many valiant stories coming out from the Chinese-Burma war theater. Accounts of them surviving vicious Japanese attacks such as showers of machine-gun bullets and dire living conditions while working along the Burma Road were covered even by overseas newspapers.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of its temporary closure from 18 July to 18 October 1940, Japanese air fighters continuously shelled key installations along the strategic highway. One volunteer recounted a dreadful incident where the Japanese airplanes destroyed over half of the fifty trucks that were on their way to Longling County, killing many of the drivers.<sup>31</sup>

The Nanyang Volunteers also played an active role in British efforts to thwart Japanese invasions in British Burma in early 1942 by transporting war materials and Chinese troops across the Chinese border into Burma. Liao Guangwu, a section leader of the transport convoy shared his experience when the Japanese troops were approaching Mandalay in April 1942:

April 27: Yesterday, two batches of forty trucks had left ... Unfortunately, five trucks turned back and informed us of the presence of Japanese troops blocking our route towards Lashio. Receiving instructions from American advisors and the transportation company, I had to destroy the remaining petrol and trucks, burning all that remained in the airport and warehouse. Then I boarded a ship filled with refugees and got off at Bhamo. I found an abandoned truck, which I drove to reach the Chinese border. It was a

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25 *The Straits Times* (Singapore) 26 July 1939.

26 Dang Wenjun and Shuai Hanluo, *Hua zhi hun qiao zhi guang: Nanyang huaqiao jigong hui guo kang zhan qishi zhounian jinian huodong tuwen jijin* (S.I. 2009), p. 37.

27 Chan Chow Wah, *Light on the Lotus Hill: Shuang Lin Monastery and the Burma Road* (Singapore: Khoo Chee Vihara, 2009), p. 52.

28 Overseas Chinese Museum, ed., *Nanqiao jigong* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2005).

29 Chen, *Nanqiao hun*, p. 399.

30 *New York Times* 22 October and 16 December 1940.

31 Longling County is situated 700 km west of Kunming, along the border with British Burma. See Qin Qinzhi and Tang Jialin, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi* (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1989), p. 98.

treacherous return as I faced several Japanese ambush in the detour. I then had to desert the truck and wander in the wilderness. After three days on the Irrawaddy River, I met up with other members of the Chinese military and together we headed toward India ...<sup>32</sup>

Such were the stories that illustrated the Nanyang Volunteers' patriotism for their ancestral country in times of crisis, or simply for a just cause to resist the Japanese aggressors. More importantly, shaped by their frontline engagement with the enemy, it was a markedly different set of war memories as compared to that of their compatriots who stayed behind in the Nanyang region.

### **Displaced and Forgotten: Lost in Repatriation**

Patriotism and highly-charged emotions aside, the rosy tale of the Nanyang Volunteers and their self-sacrificial feats did not last long. As early as in late 1939, the recruitment project had lost its earlier glamor and appeal. Two months into the project, Tan wrote a letter to STC on 28 April 1939 to enquire about the rumors on the harsh conditions of the Nanyang Volunteers. Despite drawing up an elaborate plan to improve the conditions on the frontline and promising extra financial support to relieve the Nationalist government of any monetary burden, his proposal fell through.<sup>33</sup>

Discrimination and desertion were not uncommon among the Nanyang Volunteers. It was reported that in July, sixty-two mechanics deserted their posts due to alleged ill-treatment.<sup>34</sup> One volunteer, Li Shun'an, recounted his experience in military training when the officers showed favoritism toward the mainlander Chinese soldiers and treated the overseas Chinese volunteers differently.<sup>35</sup> In another occasion when one of the volunteers was falsely accused of stealing vehicle fuel, it almost resulted in a violent confrontation with the military police.<sup>36</sup> Incidents like these prompted Tan to take swift action and it was not long before he decided to organize a comfort mission to China – to show support for their anti-Japanese war effort in China but also to probe into how the Nanyang Volunteers were faring. On 26 March 1940, accompanied by a team of fifty overseas Chinese delegates, Tan arrived in Chungking on an eight-month-long mission. The welfare of the Nanyang Volunteers was high on his priority list as he visited the Burma Road twice during this trip.<sup>37</sup>

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32 *Ibid.*, pp. 122-125.

33 Tan, *Nanqiao huiyilu*, pp. 86-87.

34 Akashi, *The Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement*, p. 114.

35 Demobilised Overseas Chinese Mechanics & Drivers Association Singapore, ed., *Demobilised Overseas Chinese Mechanics & Drivers Association 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine* (Singapore: The City Press, 1959), p. 55.

36 Qin and Tang, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi*, p. 104.

37 Akashi, *The Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement*, p. 115.

There was a Teochew driver from Singapore who was imprisoned by STC for three days. Of average physique, he was wearing just one layer of clothing despite the cold weather of about fifty degrees Fahrenheit. I asked, "Why are you wearing so little?" He replied, "My belongings are all in Nanning, but when the city fell, I was away on a transport mission. The company said that they would provide reimbursement, but I have yet to receive any. Besides, clothes are so expensive so I can hardly afford them." "Are you given any blanket?" "No." I wept upon hearing his reply. I had urged so many overseas Chinese to return, but upon seeing his plight, I was overwhelmed by guilt, questioning myself if I had done the right thing."<sup>38</sup>

Tan was disheartened. He had also received news from his aides that many of the items donated to the volunteers, including blankets, clothing, and medical supplies, were usurped by the local Nationalist authorities.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, some drivers complained that they had to transport Western luxury items and even female entertainers for the Nationalist officials.<sup>40</sup> In his report published on 7 July 1941, Tan highlighted the mismanagement of the transport service, recommending foreign supervision, specifically from the Americans, to reorganize and improve conditions on the Burma Road.<sup>41</sup> These were the early signs of Tan's disappointment with the Nationalists. As postwar developments later revealed, this fateful episode played an important role in shifting Tan's allegiance toward the Communists in the upcoming ensuing civil war.<sup>42</sup>

By January 1942, the STC had ceased to function but in name.<sup>43</sup> Japanese troops had overrun British Burma and were approaching the Chinese border on Yunnan in May 1942. The Japanese had conquered much of Southeast Asia, while prominent Chinese leaders such as Tan Kah Kee were either captured by the Japanese or in hiding, leaving no one with the means or ability to coordinate and oversee the overseas Chinese war efforts. The narrative of the Nanyang Volunteers as tales of despair and desperation subsumed earlier stories of bravery and patriotism, fading away in local memories of the postwar Chinese communities.

Around two hundred drivers were dispatched to British India while some joined the Communist Eight Route Army to continue war efforts against the Japanese.<sup>44</sup> A

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38 Tan, *Nanqiao huiyilu*, pp. 291-292.

39 Rana Mitter, *Forgotten ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), p. 277; Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, *Huiyi Chen Jiageng*, p. 413.

40 Qin and Tang, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi*, p. 100.

41 Tan Kah Kee, "A 'South Seas' Chinese reports on the Burma Road," *Pacific Affairs* 14, 4 (1941), pp. 463-472.

42 Lu Hu, "Changing Roles, Continuing Ideas: Tan Kah Kee in 1949 and 1950," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 4, 1 (2008), pp. 1-19.

43 Qin and Tang, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi*, p. 127.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 128.



handful of them were sent for spy training before embarking on espionage missions in Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> But most volunteers were simply laid off and left to fend for themselves. Some fortunate ones found their life partners and settled down in Burma. Those who remained were later relocated to a retraining center without any form of assistance. Poor living conditions in the center forced many to leave, of which most were reduced to begging in the streets, while some succumbed to the temptations of opium smoking. Coverage by the local newspapers revealed feelings of disillusionment and injustice that were commonly shared among the overseas Chinese: “[t]hey (The Nanyang Volunteers) did not let their ancestral home down. It was the country that had failed them,” “[w]e were betrayed by the Nationalist government.”<sup>46</sup> The fate and future of these volunteers hanged delicately in the balance.

In September 1943, one of Tan Kah Kee’s most able aides, Hau Say-huan, resettled many of the displaced Nanyang Volunteers in the towns of Xiaguan and Dali.<sup>47</sup> Three months later, he visited Fujian Province and met with local Chinese leaders to coordinate efforts in providing assistance for the estranged volunteers by forming the Yunnan Overseas Chinese Mutual Aid Association. On 20 January 1944, he organized a donation drive to raise 500,000 Yuan for the Association, which then had about 700 members. Although the Nationalist government promised financial support, it was the military and the Red Cross Association in Guizhou that donated essential necessities and medical supplies. Expenditures were covered by the generous private donation from Hu Chunyu, a prominent leader of the Chinese Burmese community. The finances from the government never arrived.<sup>48</sup> Limited official assistance finally came in early 1944 when the Guizhou Transport Authority set up a Retraining Center in Guizhou and created new jobs for about 110 volunteers.

The surrender of the Japanese troops in September 1945 was a euphoric moment for the millions of Chinese who had suffered under Japanese rule. The Nanyang Volunteers were no exception. It was a moment of celebration for the success of their anti-war contributions and the liberation of their ancestral homeland, as envisioned by them when they set sail for China six years ago. However, their joy was short-lived as problems soon plagued the repatriation process.

Contemporary Chinese sources often blame the Nationalist government as the main culprit behind the slow repatriation process, which was delayed by a year before the first group of overseas Chinese returned to Southeast Asia in November 1946.<sup>49</sup>

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45 Chen, *Nanqiao hun*, pp. 77-78.

46 Qin and Tang, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi*, p. 104.

47 Lim Siok Poh, *Remembering Our Ancestor Hau Say-huan (Hou Xifan) 1883-1944* (Singapore 2009), pp. 39-40.

48 Xu and Cai, *Xin Ma huaren kang Ri shiliao*, p. 821.

49 Xia Yuqing, “Daozuqiechang: Erzhan hou ‘Nanqiao Jigong’ de fuyuan yu nanfan,” *Jinan Journal (Philosophy and Social Science)* 37, 2 (2015), pp. 38-49; Huang Xiaojian, Zhao Hongying, and Cong Yuefen, *Haiwai qiaobao yu kang Ri zhanzheng* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1995), p. 303.

Contrary to this claim, archival records show that shortly after the Japanese surrender, there was an informal meeting between the Nationalist officials and the British, in which the latter gave verbal approval in principle for the repatriation of overseas Chinese back to British Burma and other British settlements in Southeast Asia. However in December, the British recommended a postponement, citing that the situation in Southeast Asia had yet to return to prewar normalcy. Moreover, the name list of the volunteers prepared for the repatriation process had gone missing. In the numerous letter correspondences between the Association and the Nationalist government from November 1945 to May 1946, the latter insisted on not having received any name list, although the Association maintained that it had sent the list out in March 1946. The authorities finally received a new copy in June 1946, and by then emotions were high in Malaya and Singapore as four Nanyang Volunteers had successfully returned to Singapore by themselves, causing a stir in the local Chinese population. An article published in *Nanyang Shangbao* (Nanyang Business Daily) on 30 May 1946 criticized the Nationalist government for being indifferent to the plight of the volunteers after the closure of the Burma Road, citing the emotional pleas of those wanted to return to Nanyang.<sup>50</sup> In light of these developments, Tan Kah Kee organized the Federation's first meeting to discuss the volunteers' repatriation. Just four days after the Federation meeting took place in Kuala Lumpur on 17 June, the Nationalist government swiftly approved the repatriation budget, a possible reaction from recognizing these pressures.

It has been estimated that around one-third of the Nanyang Volunteers perished in the war, while around a thousand of them remained in China due to various reasons. Repatriation of the remaining 1,154 volunteers was no easy feat. It was a complex two-stage process: first, the Nationalist government provided transport to bring them from their current locations to the ports of departure (Guangzhou, Shantou, Xiamen, and Shanghai); second, they would then board existing merchant liners back to their desired ports-of-call in Southeast Asia, including Singapore. Each received three hundred US dollars from the government while any excess expenses were subsidized by the Federation.<sup>51</sup> All the registered volunteers received a grand farewell and were awarded a medal of service, similar to the ones that had greeted them when they arrived in China seven years ago. Finally, on 26 October 1946, the first batch of Nanyang Volunteers was on their way home.

### **Resurrected and Celebrated: Reframing as “Globalized War Memories”**

For the volunteers who returned, home was no longer the same as before. Years of war had crippled the local economy, and the Japanese Occupation had brought about an irreversible change in local politics, altering social networks and inter-racial relationships. One major side effect of Japanese policies was the polarization of racial

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50 Xie Peiping, ed., *Zhanhou qianfan huaqiao shiliao huibian*, vol. 3, (Taipei: Guoshi guan, 2005).

51 Xia, “Daozuqiechang,” p. 48.

tensions in plural societies such as Malaya's, where there was a strong undercurrent of mistrust and resentment between the Chinese and the Malays.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, racial identities were tinged with ideological affiliations as overseas Chinese communities were portrayed as sympathizers of Communism during the Emergency. Efforts to celebrate anti-Japanese war efforts were thus severely censored by the colonial authorities, in an attempt to curb public display of Chinese chauvinism which could endanger public security. Even in Communist China, an ideological discrimination ensued against the volunteers as most had returned to fight under the Nationalist banner during the war. One such tragic story was that of Li Yuemei, who committed suicide after repeated, unbearable harassments during the Cultural Revolution. Memories of the heroic deeds of the Nanyang Volunteers were brushed aside and remained latent.

With the exception of the two memorials built in Penang and Selangor, Malaya, in 1946 and 1947 respectively, proposals to erect similar memorials commemorating the efforts of the Nanyang Volunteers in other places were met with much opposition or little enthusiasm. For instance, in Kuching, such plans were met with opposition within the Kuching Chinese Chamber of Commerce, probably due to the uneasy racial tensions at that time.<sup>53</sup> In Singapore, the idea was conceptualized in the annual meeting of the Nanyang Volunteers Veterans Mutual-Aid Association held on 12 June 1955 and was brought up to the attention of the directors in the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI).<sup>54</sup> However, due to logistical difficulties in acquiring a suitable location for the war memorial, no actions were taken despite numerous appeals from the Nanyang Volunteers veterans.

Postwar war commemoration in Singapore revolved around the themes of suffering and victimhood. Shortly after the war, with the graves of the *Sook Ching* victims still unknown, all eyes were on the 1947 war trial where the local Chinese community was anticipating an appropriate judgment to be passed on the Japanese aggressors. However, the sentencing of two Japanese officers to death and life imprisonment for five others fell short of public expectations – the “blood debt” of the Japanese remained unsettled.<sup>55</sup> In the immediate years after the war, the local Chinese community was more concerned with addressing the injustices closer to home, as compared to the more distant issue of the Nanyang Volunteers whose “patriotic sacrifices” in the grander, “international struggle against fascism for world peace” remained unrecognized officially.<sup>56</sup> Even as late as February 1962, when the graves of the *Sook Ching* victims

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52 Cheah Boon Kheng, “Memory as History and Moral Judgement: Oral and Written Accounts of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya,” in *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*, eds., Patricia Pui Huen Lim and Diana Wong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 28.

53 Fong Hon Kah and Julitta Shau Hua Lim, *Heroic Deeds of the Sarawak Chinese Mechanics in the Resistance War of China, 1937–1945* (Kuching: International Times, 1999).

54 *Lianhe Zaobao* 26 February 2012.

55 Blackburn, “The Collective Memory of the Sook Ching Massacre,” p. 79.

56 See articles in *Demobilised Overseas Chinese Mechanics*, pp. 11, 41, 64.

were unearthed, Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had to weigh political concerns by assuming control from the SCCCI to build a national memorial commemorating a shared war experience of all Singaporeans, regardless of ethnicity, during the Japanese Occupation – a significant departure from the SCCCI impetus to commemorate the Chinese victims.<sup>57</sup> To the Singaporean government, there were more political advantages to be gained from appeasing local Chinese grievances than to commemorate Chinese war heroes, which might have unwarranted repercussions of promoting Chinese chauvinism in view of the Communist insurgency in neighboring Malaya. The state's deliberate attempt at downplaying the theme of Chinese heroism in the war fitted well with the national narrative of common suffering during WWII, and displayed its priorities in shaping national identity by using one single dominant discourse. The complex local memories of the volunteers are thus marginalized and even suppressed as this trajectory deviates from the official narrative which privileged the exclusive yet multi-ethnic character of the nation-building project.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its earlier cold shoulders on the issue, the SCCCI began championing the cause to build a war memorial for the Nanyang Volunteers in the 1980s. In November 1986, then-chairman of SCCCI, Tan Keong Choon, who was also the nephew of Tan Kah Kee, led a delegation to Yunnan to visit the mechanic drivers who stayed behind in China after the war. He recommended the building of a war memorial in the city of Kunming, which was later approved by the provincial government.<sup>59</sup> In 1999, in conjunction with the sixtieth anniversary of the return of the Nanyang Volunteers to China, articles telling the stories of the Nanyang Volunteers resurfaced in local newspaper, raising awareness among the Singaporean public of their existence.<sup>60</sup> 6 years later, when the Yunnan provincial authorities completed another war memorial at Wanding, situated at the end of the Chinese section of the Yunnan-Burma Road, another appeal appeared in the Chinese press, requesting for the commemoration of the volunteers in Singapore.<sup>61</sup> Then in 2009, the National Archives of Singapore collaborated with China's State Archives Administration and the Yunnan Provincial Archives in organizing a pictorial exhibition on the Nanyang Volunteers in the cities of Kunming, Beijing, and Singapore.<sup>62</sup> Sporadic but renewed interests in the Nanyang Volunteers had resurfaced in the public spaces of Singapore.

After decades of molding a multi-racial society based on state-sanctioned meritocratic principles free of ethnic bias, the state was confident that Chinese chauvinism was no longer a pertaining threat to the social fabric in Singapore. It began reengaging Chinese-inspired values by devising its version of "Asian Values" in the 1980s and

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57 Blackburn, "The Collective Memory of the Sook Ching Massacre," pp. 83-85.

58 Assmann and Conrad, "Introduction," p. 6.

59 Overseas Chinese Museum, ed., *Nanqiao jigong*, foreword.

60 *Lianhe Zaobao* 22 August 1999.

61 *Ibid.*, 1 September 2005.

62 *Ibid.*, 21 February 2013.

1990s. In 1995, Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, remarked that “the Singaporean society had come of age, as seen in the setting up of the Chinese Heritage Centre and the restoration of the Sun Yet Sen Villa and Kampong Glam, without fears of creating Chinese chauvinism or a divisive mood among Singaporeans.”<sup>63</sup> Nation-building in Singapore seemed to have reached the next stage where national institutions became more accommodating toward peripheral histories.<sup>64</sup>

Concurrently, the state began relaxing its policies towards war commemoration in the 1990s.<sup>65</sup> In 1995, there was a concerted effort to (re)shape public perception of WWII, beginning with a series of commemorative ceremonies that were held around the island, and the official demarcation of eleven places as memorial sites.<sup>66</sup> This included the erection of a marker about the Indian National Army in the city center despite its controversial collaboration with the Japanese army during the war; a war memorial plaque at Kent Ridge Park to honor the fighting spirit and patriotism of Lieutenant Adnan Saidi and his Malay Brigade during the Battle of Pasir Panjang. The SCCCI, which has been organizing the commemorative rites on 15 February every year at the Civil War Memorial, had also published a book on Chinese anti-Japanese resistance movements – later adapted into a local Mandarin drama of the same name *The Price of Peace*.<sup>67</sup> Civil organizations too were emboldened to take a step towards addressing topics that were once evaded by the state. However, contrary to what state officials had proclaimed in their views of the maturing Singaporean society, the state was still apprehensive in allocating a physical space and erecting a war memorial to recognize the war efforts of the Nanyang Volunteers.

The long-awaited breakthrough came in May 2011 when SCCCI organized a public screening of a documentary on the Nanyang Volunteers that received an overwhelming response. In the following month, five Chinese associations from Malaysia and Singapore jointly organized a road trip, from 25 June to 30 July, to trace the route taken by the volunteers. A total of eighty Malaysians, nine Singaporeans, and nine Chinese nationals took part in this 35-day-long endeavor.<sup>68</sup> Various Chinese

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63 *The Straits Times* 22 July 1995.

64 Huang, Jianli and Hong Lysa, “History and the Imaginaries of ‘Big Singapore’: Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, 1 (2004), pp. 65-89; Loh Kah Seng, “Black Areas: Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Post-war Singapore Historiography,” *SOJOURN* 22, 1 (2007), pp. 1-29; Terence Chong, “The State and the New Society: The Role of the Arts in Singapore Nation-building,” *Asian Studies Review* 34, 2 (2010), pp. 131-149.

65 Diana Wong, “Memory Suppression and Memory Production: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore,” in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds., Fujitani Takashi, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 218.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

67 Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, ed., *Heping de daijia: Malai bandao lunxian qijian, 136 budui ji qita fanqinlue shili jishi* (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1995).

68 *Ibid.*, 11 September 2011.

newspapers from Malaysia, Singapore, and China closely reported the event, and a book was published later.<sup>69</sup> On 12 February 2012, during the annual public lecture commemorating the fall of Singapore, academics and members of the SCCC I mooted the idea of erecting a war memorial for the Nanyang Volunteers. This was met with an overwhelming support from the participants and the event was reported extensively in the local Chinese newspapers.<sup>70</sup>

This coverage generated much public discussion in the forum section throughout February 2012, with a total of six different articles supporting the proposition. With this timely series of high-profile activities organized by civil organizations, public appeals for the creation of the war memorial finally gained traction. The issue was later raised in the Parliament sitting on 2 March when Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng enquired about the government's take on the proposal. In response, the Senior Minister of State for the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, Grace Fu, said,

“[T]he government supports these activities. The contributions of Nanyang Volunteers during the Sino-Japanese War *are* [*sic*] noteworthy and deserve praise. Their fearless self-sacrifice in particular is worth emulating.”<sup>71</sup>

Finally, after considering suitable places including the Zhongshan Park and the Ee Hoe Hean Club, the latter of which was the gathering place for the Nanyang Volunteers before they headed for the harbor, the state officially announced that a stone sculpture commemorating the volunteers would be erected within the vicinity of the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.<sup>72</sup> The choice of venue is a deliberate and well-calculated move by the state. It has been claimed by scholars that this was a lucid indication that the state was wooing China, in light of its enormous market potential. The state seemed confident of mobilizing historical ethnic ties – the inauguration of the state-initiated concept of the “Big Singapore,” one that is larger than its official geographical boundaries and older than its historical links – a hitherto taboo subject in multi-ethnic Singapore.<sup>73</sup> The location of the stone sculpture of the Nanyang Volunteers thus signified that this episode of WWII, in light of the current globalization trend, would be part of a grander scheme of things in portraying Singapore's history as a connective node with other historical narratives in the region and beyond. More importantly, the active participation of civil society gave the state the final impetus toward realizing an unfulfilled wish of the surviving war veterans since the end of the war.

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69 See Zou Lu, *Gandong de lucheng: chongzou Nanqiao jigong Dian Mian lu* (Singapore: Lingzi chuanmei, 2013).

70 *Lianhe Zaobao* 13 February 2012.

71 Grace Fu, *Head Q – Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts*, Singapore Parliament Reports (2 March 2012).

72 *Lianhe Zaobao* 22 March 2012.

73 Huang and Hong, “History and the Imaginaries of ‘Big Singapore’,” p. 66.

## Conclusion

“Wars make good histories. In particular, they make good national histories.”<sup>74</sup>

Since the early 1990s, there is an efflorescence of scholarly works challenging the apparently absolute connection between memory and nation. The nation as a foundation of identity draws its legitimacy from what it defines as official historical narrative. The rise of alternative multiple memories contesting the grand narrative weakens that authoritative monopoly over the construct of national history and thus results in what Pierre Nora describes as the binary opposition of memory and history.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, it is undeniable that war memory and commemoration play an important role in the construction of the identity of a nation-state: a modern creation defined by its fixed geographical boundaries and supposed historical links to a grandiose past.<sup>76</sup> She continues, “We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left,”<sup>77</sup> which brings to attention the urgency to address certain aspects of the past that would soon die out with the passing of the earlier generation.

War memories are primarily concerned with the relationship of individual subjects to the nation-state to which they belong, thus forming an important part in enhancing the legitimacy of the nation-state and inculcating loyalty among its citizenry.<sup>78</sup> With a common experience shared by all levels of society, war memories serve as an effective binding force to create national identity, seen in how memories of suffering and oppression under the Japanese Occupation became a unifying theme for Singapore. However, for members of society who experienced warfare in a different geographical space, involvement in active resistance subliminally separate them from the rest of their community, which they rejoined after the war. Their stories of heroic acts against the invaders could inspire members of the community. Yet, they could be relegated to public obscurity if they no longer offered any political benefit to both the state and the community as a whole.

As historian Hong Lysa claims, “In order for Singapore’s leaders to function in the world system of nation-states, they needed to shape and disseminate a sense of national identity which privileges political identification at the level of the nation-

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74 Geoffrey M. White, “Remembering Guadalcanal: National Identity and Transnational Memory-Making,” *Public Culture* 7, 3 (1995), p. 552.

75 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7-24.

76 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

77 Nora, “Between Memory and History,” p. 7.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

state – a product of negotiations with historical identities.<sup>79</sup> However, as seen in the developments of events since 1995, the state has selectively chosen certain hitherto controversial historical players to highlight its volte-face state policy in dealing with ethnic heritages and cultural links for national agenda. This included the British-aided Force 136 which featured Chinese martyr Lim Bo Seng, who was posthumously honored as a “national or proto-national hero” by state officials.<sup>80</sup> Yet, other resistance forces such as the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army, or Dalforce, which defended Singapore alongside British forces against the Japanese invaders in February 1942, remained distant to many Singaporeans, probably due to the fact that several Communist sympathizers were included in their ranks.<sup>81</sup>

Beginning in September 2012, the National Museum of Singapore featured exhibits of a fellow Nanyang Volunteer Teo Tian Soo at the Singapore History Gallery. For a war contribution that has been dubbed as the “most well organized, most effective, and most influential patriotic mass movement ever displayed by the overseas Chinese in its history,”<sup>82</sup> contemporary treatment of this historic episode seemed no less than making a mockery of the Nanyang Volunteers’ efforts. In order to make sense of Singapore’s role in WWII, we need to reconsider the war narrative that Singaporeans are familiar with. Ethnic ties and dubious patriotism aside, it is to give justice to these various unknown yet significant players who had displayed the ultimate expression of love and loyalty to one’s homeland, and for some who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their loved ones. The state might have skillfully evaded opening completely the Pandora’s Box of Singapore’s past, at least for the time being, but with the maturing of civil society and the self-awakening of the state to popular civic awareness, how well the Singaporean state can balance past ethnic ties with national aspirations will determine how history is (re)written and remembered for the future generation.

### Biographical note

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79 Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting of a National History Singapore and Its Pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 1.

80 Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa, “The Scripting of Singapore’s National Heroes: Toying with Pandora’s Box,” in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, eds., Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 219-246.

81 Kevin Blackburn and Daniel Chew Ju Ern, “Dalforce at the Fall of Singapore in 1942: An Overseas Chinese Heroic Legend,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, 2 (2005), pp. 233-259.

82 Qin and Tang, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kang Ri shi*, p. 15.